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Transcript

FROM TUNISIA TO EGYPT: PROTESTS IN THE ARAB WORLD

MONDAY, JANUARY 31, 2011
8:30 A.M.
WASHINGTON, D.C.

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Transcript by Federal News Service
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MARWAN MUASHER: Good morning, everyone. I'm glad to see a lot of people out here on a cold day. You know, things are happening at a very fast rate in Egypt, and what we're going to try to do today is just try to shed some light about some of the issues regarding what is going on in Egypt but also implications for the region and implications for U.S. policy.

[00:00:45]

I have with me Marina Ottaway, the director of the Middle East Program in Washington, and Michele Dunne, our senior associate and an expert and a scholar on Egypt. We also have, hopefully, with us Amr Hamzawy, who is in Cairo right now in Tahrir Square, and what we will try to do is to dial in and hopefully get to talk to him. He would be able to give us a firsthand account of what is going on but also help us understand what will happen in the future.

So, I don't know, Jessica, if we're ready to call Amr or – let's see if we can get him. It might be noisy but – (pause). I don't know what that means but – (laughter).

MARINA OTTAWAY: It does not sound good. (Laughter.)

MR. MUASHER: There you have it. Well, okay, we'll keep trying, and the minute we get Amr we'll just interrupt whatever we're doing and hear him speak.

I know Michele has to leave sooner than the rest of us, so Michele will start with talking about implications for U.S. policy regarding Egypt but also regarding the region as a whole. So, Michele?

[00:02:36]

MICHELE DUNNE: Thank you very much, Marwan. Good morning. I think we're headed toward a critical moment with Egypt. I'll be very interested to hear what Amr has to say. There's a very large demonstration planned for tomorrow, so tomorrow or the next – the next 24 to 48 hours might be the turnaround here one way or another.

The United States is in a difficult position here no matter which way this thing goes. I don't think any of us right now see the demonstrators giving up or this petering out, so that means there are a couple of possible ways. I mean, one way is that there's a transition of some kind with all the risks that that brings for Egypt and for the United States' interests. The other possibility, which I really hope won't happen, would be a very forceful crackdown and all the bad things that that brings. So, either one of these paths is really going to be quite difficult to navigate.

[00:03:38]

AMR HAMZAWY: Okay.

MR. MUASHER: All right, I think – sorry, Michele, but I think Amr is with us on the phone. Amr, can you hear me? This is Marwan.

MR. HAMZAWY: (Off mic.)

[00:03:47]

MR. MUASHER: Great. Well, we have the full room eagerly awaiting to hear your views, Amr, on what is going on. I thought we would start maybe by asking you about your views about whether the opposition, you know, has a face, whether there is any leadership emerging or what is the situation out there? And maybe you can also comment on the demonstration that is supposed to happen tomorrow, a big demonstration, and what that might – what implications that might have on what is going on.

MR. HAMZAWY: Well, Marwan, let me start by the second point. I am at Tahrir and I have been here with thousands of Egyptians, I would say 7-8,000. The square is filling up, the number of Egyptians protesting is increasing. So let me tell you that everyone is more or less expecting the demonstrations tomorrow to be as huge as the different demonstrations which took place last Friday. There are news that trains coming to Cairo from different places in Egypt are going to be stopped in an effort by the government to limit the number of protesters, but, once again, I mean, I have never seen such a commitment by so many different Egyptians really coming from all different walks of life and from different social backgrounds to change the regime, to change the government. I'm expecting a big demonstration tomorrow which will add to the pressure on the government.

Now, the big question is twofold, to my mind. One, has the opposition reached a consensus on a figure, on a face, or on a group? And the second component of that question is, has the regime made up its mind in terms of responding positively to the street's demands?

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With regard to the first point, no. The opposition, and here I am referring to political parties as well as informal groups as well as the Muslim Brotherhood, continues to be in a state of contestation, of parallel claims with regard to representing the people, representing Egyptian citizens who basically made this all. And they remain in a situation of contestation over parallel claims, which really minimizes their credibility out here. People are frustrated with ElBaradei's attempts to put himself forward, other figures' attempts to minimize ElBaradei's credibility. This is going on a bit. But in my mind, quite normal. We are in a moment of transition and the street, to my mind, will push in the direction of unity among the opposition. Agreement is going to take a few days.

The second point, the responsiveness and dysfunction of the regime and here we really need you, and I am addressing not only those representatives of the U.S. administration who might be in the room, but everyone else, experts on the Middle East, Arab-Americans, Egyptian-Americans. The response of the regime has been so far extremely slow and extremely disappointing. Now slow, of course you have been following it. Disappointing because the demands are, as you know, a national unity government, the formation of the cabinet which was just announced is as far from being representative of the different movements—Marwan, I'm being pulled in different directions by people here, so stay with me a bit. And I haven't slept in four days so I might be confusing and confused, so I hope you get something –

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MR. MUASHER: It won't get you a bigger salary, Amr. (Laughter.)

MR. HAMZAWY: No, the question of salary is minor, forget about that. (Laughter.)

So what I'm saying is that the response of the regime so far has been extremely slow and disappointing. The formation of the cabinet was just announced, to the great disappointment of everyone is more or less not NDP

but primarily establishment figures and ruling out any means or positions of opposition or any means of representation of those who made the changes in Egypt in the last days.

[00:08:37]

Secondly, there are demands, which are amend the constitution, dissolve the parliament because the parliament, as well as the Shura Council, elections have been rigged. So, dissolve the parliament, create a national unity government and a constitutional assembly to amend the constitution and organize presidential and parliamentary elections in six months. This is sort of the same transitional period which everyone is pushing for. Of course you have some elements saying no, Mubarak will have to be put on trial, but this is not going to get us anywhere. We are pushing for a transitional period—and here I am referring to writers, intellectuals, representatives of the different groups and parties.

But the response of the government and the regime and Mubarak himself has been disappointing to a great extent. People are wondering – and my last point – with regard to the U.S. role in what is happening. People are following it quite closely. There is a degree of frustration with regard to the slowness of the U.S. response, because up until now we haven't heard a clear word about their demands: dissolving the parliament, elections, amending the constitution, and transparent presidential and parliamentary elections. People are determined to continue protesting until we reach a good end.

[00:10:04]

MR. MUASHER: Amr, what is, in your view – Amr, we hear a lot of views here in Washington, but what, in your view, are the chances of the Mubarak regime, you know, staying in power and – well, let's address this point.

MR. HAMZAWY: You know, Marwan, I mean, Egypt has changed already. I mean, this is not the country which we had before last Tuesday, and definitely before last Friday, and they will have to realize it. I mean, now, with regard to the regime, I guess we need them to be very specific.

[00:10:36]

Those who are in command and in charge are primarily representatives of the military establishment, the army, which are on the ground, after the chain of command to the Ministry of the Interior completely – completely – failed. But this army, which is saving and sustaining the regime and we have Omar Suleiman the vice president now. So it is really the military establishment, and it's up to the military establishment to either – to my mind either do a safe and secure transition to democracy, following the Tunisian example or Egypt making its own example, or basically following what we know—a bit of the old regime and a lot of the new regime addressing the real issue of amending the constitution, opening up the fiscal state.

[00:11:20]

Coming back to the question, Marwan, of the opposition, one of the reasons for these parallel claims, is no one has been out there in the streets since a very long time, so we do not know how to judge the popularity of ElBaradei or movements or parties. So, you need to open it up. You need to amend the constitution. I've been talking to everyone here and saying, well, let's focus on the procedures and the mix of old and new. This is the only way for the regime to do a safe transition to democracy.

The question is how quick they are going to make up their minds, because they have been responding very slow. And this is not a question of weeks; it's a question of days. And so it's really upon the military establishment, Omar Suleiman and other key figures, to make up their mind and see how we can move all of us ahead into a transitional period and opening up the political space to be contested freely and with international and domestic safeguards and presidential and parliamentary elections in six months.

And this way they will avoid removing, which the military establishment will not accept, removing President Mubarak. He is the head of the military establishment, and of course, with his background, they regard him as their symbol, as their representative. So they might be willing to accept opening up the political space and moving beyond Mubarak or a post-Mubarak era in six months, but they would never accept that Mubarak should be put on trial or removed, as some groups have suggested.

[00:12:56]

MR. MUASHER: Would they accept Suleiman to head the transition, Amr, in your view?

MR. HAMZAWY: Yes, yes. I mean, there are two great assets on General Suleiman's side. One, he is well accepted. I mean, he is not popular but he is accepted and respected. People do not mind him being the vice president. Second, there is great respect for the military establishment Marwan. And, you know, I was here on Friday and when their tanks started to enter Tahrir Square, they were greeted by everyone. People still believe this is a national establishment which is committed to the nation. And so he's part of the two great assets on the side of General Suleiman and the establishment if they which to do so.

And, thirdly, you are offering them – as a demonstrating street and a demonstrating society, you are offering them a safe transition. You are offering them a safe way out, not a Ben Ali model, but a safe way out.

[00:13:58]

Now, again, yes, he can do it. Are they committed? I'm not sure, but, one again, we need the pressure from the street, which are continuing, and we need you. I mean, on the government and non-governmental level, you need to do what you can. Secretary Clinton's speech that she expects elections soon, this was quite positive. So we need to see more of that and we need to see more statements and not the slow reaction which basically sort of waits to see how it's going to turn out– the struggle is going on.

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And I'm using a militant language which I've never used before in my life, but this is partly what's going on here. So, it's going on and at a very fast pace. So they should not wait and see, unlike the Tunisia case.

MR. MUASHER: Let's try to open it up and have a few questions. Sayid (ph).

[00:15:05]

MR. MUASHER: Yes. Maybe we'll take a few questions before Amr has a chance to answer, in the interests of time. Go ahead, Sayid.

Q: Amr, real quick. I just want to repeat one of the questions that Marwan asked about the sustainability of Mubarak and the sustainability of the regime. As it seems, the message that is coming clear through is that the demonstrators, indeed, will not stop without the removal of Mubarak. So, can you give us, like, the timetable?

MR. MUASHER: Okay, other questions? Please.

Q: Hello, Amr. It's Laura Marlow (sp) from the Irish Times newspaper. We've read about demonstrators holding up tear gas canisters that say, "Made in the USA." There has been very little – I've heard very little about anti-American feeling. Is is possible that it will become an anti-American movement the way the revolution did in Tehran?

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And, secondly, you said people were impatient with the U.S., and with the Obama administration. What would be the best possible course of events, and what should the Obama administration do?

MR. HAMZAWY: Marwan?

MR. MUASHER: Yes?

MR. HAMZAWY: With all due respect, I cannot seem to hear the questions well. I guess –

[00:16:27]

MR. MUASHER: Well, one question –

MR. HAMZAWY: I can hear you very well; I'm not hearing the questions.

MR. MUASHER: All right. Sorry, Amr. One question had to do with the Mubarak regime and, you know, once again, what do you think in terms of time – how much time does the Mubarak regime have? And the other question had to do with whether this uprising is going to turn anti-American, which it hasn't so far, the way the Iranian revolution did in '79. And what should the president do about it?

[00:17:00]

MR. HAMZAWY: Right. Let me start with the second question. Let me give you a sense of what's going on. I mean, this is non-ideological populist movement which is shared nationwide. We have been demonstrating since Tuesday and we haven't seen – I haven't seen a single banner, or a single slogan which I could describe as ideological. I'm not seeing a single anti-American, not seeing a single anti-Israeli, and they are not even interested in what is happening around us. This is a very local movement, people are interested in Egypt, in Mubarak, it is about autocracy and authoritarianism.

And is it going to turn anti-American? No, I don't think so. Is it going to turn Islamist? No, it is not going to turn Islamist, because the street is well represented. And one of the great outcomes of what has been going on, is we have a silent majority without exaggeration, has been doing it its way. So it is not Islamist, it is not liberal, it is the silent majority which is really doing it right now, so I don't see that happening.

The first question was with regard to the time – as I said, it is very fast paced, and I guess they measured the situation strategically wrong before Tuesday and before Friday. Until Friday they were responding basically using the security apparatus, and now giving promises which are not being materialized in concrete procedures like amending the constitution. So this is not going to contain the protests, and I think it is a matter of days, not weeks.

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Finally, the question of what the administration should do. Basically they should call Suleiman and ask him to do the following: call a unity cabinet, dissolve the Parliament, and call for presidential and parliamentary elections in 6 months, while giving the authority of the parliament and Shura Council to the people in a Constitutional Assembly to amend the constitution, and to open up the political arena for parties and movements to contest for the interest and loyalty of the street. Because otherwise we will always have these parallel claims, is ElBaradei representative? So we need a very concrete timeline, if not this will only confirm lack of credibility of the U.S. which has been shown by the slowness of their response.

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MR. MUASHER: Amr, thank you very much. We are going to let you go. Please stay safe and out of trouble. You're doing a great job. Thank you so much.

MR. HAMZAWY: Thank you very much, Marwan. Give my best to everyone. And once again, to Egyptian Americans and Arab-Americans, (in Arabic).

MR. MUASHER: Thank you so much, Amr. Amr is just saying –

MR. HAMZAWY: My thanks, Marwan.

MR. MUASHER: Thank you – Amr is just saying that this is a transformational moment in Egypt's history. Obviously he is feeling very, very emotional about all of this.

Okay, that was Amr from Midan Tahrir. (Laughter.) Now back to the studio and Michele.

[00:21:04]

MS. DUNNE: Okay, well, hard to – I can't top the drama of Amr's – and he had some very interesting things to say. I mean, some questions that occurred to me – you know, there is this question of whether the Egyptian government – whether it means Mubarak or whether it means Omar Suleiman taking control – is going to be willing to negotiate some kind of a transition. They still seem to be in the mode of wanting to do the minimum and just do sort of top-down, just to impose what they want to do rather than making this an inclusive process.

But as Amr noted, there's still a problem with the opposition not being quite unified, and it's not entirely clear to what extent Mohamed ElBaradei, for example, can be the focal point. He's not the leader of the opposition, but can he at least be the person who's empowered to speak on their behalf with the government?

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That's another question I think – you know, the political opposition in Egypt didn't start this whole thing. As Amr noted, it's very much a grassroots protest. And to what extent is it necessary for the formal political

opposition to be involved in a national unity government or in negotiating with the Mubarak government? So I think that's going to be very interesting to see in the next couple of days.

Just briefly, one last observation on U.S. policy and what this means. I mean, we all know, you know, there are a lot of implications for U.S. interests – U.S. interests in peace in the region, security interests and so forth, but beyond that, just to merely look at these issues of democratization and so forth, I think, you know, what we have seen in this uprising in Egypt is an utter failure of the agenda of this kind of top-down reform in the region.

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The U.S. has failed to push it effectively, and governments, certainly including Egypt's government, have failed to do it effectively. And so, what we've seen now is instead of top-down reform, you get bottom-up change. I hope it's not – you know, it doesn't have to go that way in every country in the region and I hope that we'll learn some lessons from that about being a little bit more serious about engaging with governments in the region about reforms that are really meaningful and not cosmetic because, you know, we see now that there is a price to pay.

MR. MUASHER: Thank you so much, Michele. Maybe I'll start with this last point and very quickly try to draw some lessons from this crisis as they apply to other Arab countries. And I have a few of them that I will state quickly.

The first lesson, in my opinion, is it's not just the economy, stupid. It's very clear that this is not an economic crisis, that while it has been triggered by the economy, obviously there are more structural underlying themes, primarily that of governance. It is about governance. It is about the low quality of governance in Egypt, in Tunisia. And this is the first lesson I think that the rest of the Arab countries need to draw.

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You cannot address this through economic means. You cannot address this through raising salaries, through reducing prices and hope that, by itself, this is going to result in a calming down of emotions across the Arab world. This is about governance primarily, in my view.

And this is why – you know, why I think most advisors in the Arab world today are saying, we are not Tunisia, we don't have to worry. You know, our circumstances are different. I don't agree with that at all. Yes, every country is different but, yes, also every country is the same in that there is an underlying theme that – a common thread that, if you want, joins all of the region together, which is that of governance. And this is an issue that I hope other Arab countries would take note from and start to address the governance issue and not just the economic problem.

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The third lesson is the "bread before freedom" argument does not work. This is the argument that was put forward by most, if not all, Arab countries: Let's, you know, feed people's stomachs, let people feel good economically, and then once they do that, they will, you know, take the wise and reasonable political choices once we open up the political space.

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What "bread before freedom" has done basically is economic liberalization without the system of checks and balances, which has, in almost every Arab country, increased corruption. People today, because of the global financial crisis, also are saying, well, if the buy is smaller, please don't take, you know, more of it than you have in the past. This is just simply unacceptable.

That is, I think, sort of the depth of the economic liberalization or reform before political reform. Unless the two are done together, I don't think the Arab world, you know, will see a bright future. And so, what is needed, in my view, is not less economic liberalization but rather more political reform to go along with such liberalization.

Lesson number four is this argument that, you know, keeping the systems closed will keep the Islamists out. This scare tactic of using the Islamists has also been undermined. One, it's not the Islamists who are taking – are leading this demonstration, if anybody is leading this demonstration. It is the middle class, both in Tunisia and in Egypt. Clearly, it is regular Egyptians and Tunisians protesting the low quality of governance.

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Yes, Islamists might – you know, might make use of this, but I don't think that in today's age you can afford to ignore the Islamists, who are a major political force, who, if they are pursuing their means through peaceful means – as, for example, they have been in Egypt, in Tunisia, in Jordan and other places in the Arab world – then they should be part of the game. And I think, regarding Egypt, if a national unity government is not formed that includes the Islamists, I don't think that it will be seen as a credible process towards political reform.

Lesson number five, the political elite in the Arab world has argued for decades that they need to do reform, if at all, at their own pace, that there is no hurry; the street is not protesting, things are not that bad. The reformers' basic demands for reform are just exaggerated. There are special circumstances in each country that stand against a quick pace of reform, and therefore, you know, we should take it at the very slow pace.

Well, that argument has been undermined as well. You know, there is no – you don't have the luxury of sort of waiting forever. We did – actually, for decades the Arab world did seem to have that luxury. People, yes, did not go out in the street but, once again, as Tunisia has shown, you never know what sparks people to go out in the street.

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What has happened today, or in the last few weeks, in the Arab world I think, in my view, is irreversible from that point of view, that the old guard, those who are standing against reform, can no longer use this argument that we need to follow reform or have reform at our own pace. That argument simply has lost all credibility.

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And the last point I want to make is with regard to the U.S. I mean, in my view, the U.S. has played catch-up for a very long time. For decades it has either ignored reform completely or tried to impose it from the outside in a way that did not take the region's circumstances into consideration. Both ways – both ways reform has not been high on the priority list of the U.S. and now it's catching up with Egypt.

Egypt is probably too late. I don't think – whatever the U.S. does now in Egypt is probably irrelevant in the short term, but I hope that the U.S. will do it right in other countries of the world before it is too late, and insisting on a credible reform process. Reform – the argument that reform has to be homegrown, which is an argument I

totally agree with, has unfortunately been used by many countries in the Arab world to do either little or nothing on reform.

And I think that it is about time that the U.S. really engages with countries of the region not to impose reform but at least to support it, and support a credible and a gradual but serious reform process rather than ad hoc programs that don't add up in the end to any power sharing and any sort of system of checks and balances. Thank you.

[00:31:25]

MS. OTTAWAY: Okay, let me pick up – let me pick up from the last point about sort of the complacency of the Arab leadership about the passivity of the public. I was in Egypt about, oh, close to a year ago, and I was talking to some of the members of the leadership of the National Democratic Party, and I got the message very consistently from everybody I talked to: Number one, Egyptians are not rebellious people. Egyptians are docile and so on. And that was literally in those terms I heard. And, second, the military and the security forces have a game plan. And we were talking about the succession from Mubarak at that point. They have a game plan and the situation will be contained: There is no problem; we have – you know, everything is under control. So there are surprises in this life.

What I want to talk about is the issue of where is the leadership coming from in the next step? Because what we have seen, both in Tunisia and in Egypt, is the fact that these protest movements can be extremely effective. If people get angry enough – and, frankly, nobody knows what's going to trigger it, but if people get angry enough, these protest movements, with that networking, with the way they are operating, they're extremely effective in bringing people out and tearing down the regime.

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The question is, what is the next step? Who can take the leadership of this movement? Because we have to keep in mind that in this – you know, you can have a bottom-up revolt, but in the end, reform always comes from the top. It's not necessarily the old regime, but there has to be, you know, a group of leaders, essentially, that negotiate the reform, that implement the reform. Reform cannot come from the street.

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The problem now is what we are seeing is very thinly populated ranks of people who can take on the leadership. This is true in Egypt and this is true in Tunisia. We are now six weeks into the uprising in Tunisia. I don't think we should call it a revolution because it remains to be seen how much change it's going to bring about. We are six weeks into the uprising. There is not a single name that has come out in that country of leaders emerging from the ranks of the opposition. This is a movement that has no leaders.

We are – it's much easier in Egypt just to see what's happening, but right now what we are seeing is the protesters rallying very half-heartedly behind ElBaradei just because there is nobody else. And we have not heard any glowing endorsement of ElBaradei. ElBaradei has disappointed even his supporters, his early supporters, because there was the sense that he was not active enough, that he was expecting, you know, to be served on a silver platter the possibility of running for the presidency, that he was not getting his hands dirty in the streets, and he only – in fact, he was out of the country much of the time and he came back only after the uprising started.

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But because there are no better alternatives, they are rallying around him. And anybody who knows something about the Egyptian politicians and who saw the interviews with ElBaradei yesterday, the people standing next to him were some very old faces in Egyptian politics. In other words, there is not much a sign for renewal there.

What do we know about this protest movement in Egypt? And I would like to call attention to a paper that – when things were slightly quieter – Amr and I put together. We had been working on a study on the protest movements in the Arab world for a while, and we had put together what we knew at that point. It was not a complete, exhaustive report, but we put together what we knew.

And there are – in Egypt as elsewhere—there are three different strands of the protest movement. There has been a labor – and that is why tomorrow is a very crucial day, and I'll explain why. The three strains are, one is kind of the liberal youth movement, and this is the one that has brought people out in the streets. It's more of a middle-class movement, the very fact that they are all online and they are all on Twitter and Facebook and so on tells you something about the social background of these young people who are behind the movement.

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They have refused any formal organization. In fact, we had a very interesting meeting a few months ago with representatives of the protest movements, and the meeting was in Beirut. And it turned into a furious discussion at one point between the representatives of the youth movements and the representative of the old opposition on this issue of organizing online because the youth were saying this is the best way to organize. You cannot be caught, essentially; it's a network, it's not – the government cannot dismantle it.

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And the people, sort of the more traditional opposition movements, most of them come from a leftist background. They tried to say, no, no, you have to have an organization, you have to have structure and so on and so forth.

What we have seen now is the limitation – both the strength and the limitation of what the youth movement can do. They can bring people out and then what? They themselves know, if you look at some of the interviews that have been taken at least, that they have to hand over the leadership to somebody else. It's not the 20-year-olds that are going to have credibility in negotiating with Mubarak, in negotiating with the military in charge. So that's one of the components of the movement.

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The second component has been the labor movement, labor protest. And it is – I'm very bad at remembering numbers but there have been literally hundreds – and escalating every year – of labor protests, illegal strikes – strikes not sanctioned by the labor union – sit-ins in the workplace and so on. This has been an escalating process, not only in Egypt but in much of the Arab world.

And in many cases, particularly in Egypt, this labor protest tried to focus exclusively on economic grievances. There was a real attempt not to make – not to turn the economic grievances into political grievances because they knew that as long as they kept it on the economic level, the government was following a policy of appeasement so that they did increase salaries. Many of these were state-owned enterprises where they were striking.

The government did react by increasing salaries. They knew that the moment they started pushing for political demands, they would get crushed, essentially, so they avoided it.

And then the third strain was the Muslim Brotherhood. And the Muslim Brotherhood, there we have a different trajectory. Instead of getting stronger, it seemed to be getting somewhat weaker in recent years.

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In Egypt, at least, they reached the height of their influence with the 2005 elections when they got hold of 20 percent of the parliament, and then the government cracked down on them and they had been – and one of the results of the crackdown is that they you started having internal dissention in the Muslim Brotherhood about the tactics that they should be following: Were the policies right? Were they right to run for elections when, in the end, the government would just try to destroy the organization?

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And so you have these three different strains. Many of the discussions that we had with Amr in trying to analyze this situation, our conclusion was that not much was going to happen in Egypt until the three movements came together, and if the three movements ever converged, then the government would be in serious trouble.

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And I think this seems to be what is happening. The reason why I say tomorrow is crucial is that they have not called – what has been called for is not just a big demonstration; it's a general strike. And that's going to give us some sense of whether the three parts are coming together.

That said, even if they come together, very clearly, the leadership is not there. There is something very – somewhat frightening about the idea that, is this is going to be – you know, is it ElBaradei who's going to be negotiate with the regime? There does not seem to be anybody else.

And I'll leave it at that because I'm sure there are a lot of questions.

[00:40:20]

MR. MUASHER: Okay, let's open it up, please. If you can just identify yourself, please, and keep it short because I know there are a lot of questions, and we don't have much time.

Q: My name is Mohamed (Elshinnawi ?), the Voice of America. The Egypt uprising leaves Washington torn between freedom-seeking protestors and a government that has been a vital ally. How should the United States face this dilemma with deep implications for its troubled Middle East policies?

[00:41:10]

MR. MUASHER: Okay, let's take a few questions. David?

Q: David Mack, Middle East Institute. I want to congratulate both of you and Michele for the very, sort of, cool, objective approach that you've had to this. I'm going to give Amr a pass because I have been a demonstrator in Midan Tahrir as one – back in my student days. And I know it's all too easy to be swept away by euphoria.

But I think you're right, pointing to the danger of this leaderless type of movement. And my question is, is there a particular move by the U.S. government which might cause the – at least, the students and intellectuals in the streets of Cairo and wherever to approach things a little more cautiously and methodically, do a little bit of organizing themselves rather than just calling for all the old regime to leave, which hasn't gotten them very far in Tunis, for example?

[00:42:29]

Or is the U.S. standing among people like that so low at this point that it might have the other effect? And anything the U.S. does would just anger the people all – people all the more?

MR. MUASHER: Is there a woman? No. (Laughter.) You asked – (chuckles) – well, Ziyad (ph), if no woman will ask questions. (Laughter).

Q: Thank you both. I think there's been a perceptible change in American policy as far as we can get from political statements, now, with the United States not standing either with the street or with Mubarak. It is likely that this is a concession to reality, that Mubarak is finished. The question is how to do it.

The public in Egypt has lost its fear of the government. They're now – the question is whether the military and security leadership will lose its fear of its own leader and have a little bit of a – of a conversation with him where he would be let out in a dignified way and the army will avoid a confrontation with the public and thus retain its moral authority. Do you think that scenario is possible?

[00:43:58]

MR. MUASHER: Well, all the questions seem to be somewhat related. My view – you know, I'm sure Marina would like to also comment on this. My own view is these things, you know – if you judge from history, I think, I think the Mubarak regime is finished.

Whether Mr. Mubarak leaves the scene tomorrow or leaves it in six months is besides the point at this stage. What I think is starting to happen is a transitional process.

How orderly is this transitional process, will leaders emerge, will there be a national sort of consensus on the way ahead, is something that is still too early to tell. But I don't think that it is possible for President Mubarak to stay after all that has been done.

[00:44:59]

Now, what can the U.S. do about it? Again, in my view, regarding Egypt, very little. I mean, you don't build credibility in one day. You don't – you're not, you know, behind the curve for years and then you make a couple of statements and hope that people will listen to what you are saying. I don't think, frankly, the Egyptians are listening to whatever the U.S. is saying today.

There is no history of at least supporting reform – not trying to impose it, once again, but supporting reform. Mohamed just mentioned the issue about, you know, Egypt being a very reliable ally, which is very true. But it's finished. You know, you cannot keep making this argument. Whether it has been a reliable ally or not is besides the point because that ally has lost all credibility among its people. And it makes no sense, even in political

terms, to continue to, sort of, you know, support the ally. You can support the transitional process. And I hope that is what the U.S. is doing. Support a transitional process that would lead to a transition of power in an orderly manner.

What I'm worried about is what the U.S. will do with other Arab countries. I think, you know, with Egypt the U.S. sort of – it missed the boat. Okay? It missed the boat on Egypt. What is important now is not to miss the boat with other Arab countries, not to repeat the same mistake and say, we're either going to, you know, continue to support Arab regimes regardless of their record on governments or else we might be faced with vacuum.

If you do that, you will be faced with vacuum. And as we have seen, the Egyptians, the Tunisians have had trouble finding alternative leaderships. But that trouble is partly because the regimes themselves have not allowed the political space for political parties to emerge and produce leaders. It's a catch-22, and you're not – never going to sort of break out of this.

At any rate, the street has, you know, helped, hurt, however you want to look at it; has helped you break out of this. And now the street has changed the rules of the game, so that in the future, I think, it shouldn't be a black-or-white policy option: either I support blindly regimes that have a low quality of government or I also support revolutions in an unorderly way.

I think there should be a place in between where the United States will work with governments, but this time – this time – to produce a credible reform process. And frankly, I don't know whether Arab governments, you know, have drawn the right lessons or are capable of doing so. Maybe some are, maybe some are not. What I do think is that this is basically a last chance. You know? Either they do it right or they face more uprisings than just – than just in Egypt.

Marina?

[00:48:20]

MS. OTTAWAY: Okay. I'll focus just about the issue in Egypt. United States is largely a spectator at this point. I don't think there is anything that United States can do that's going to change the course of what is happening now. I think for the United States, it's more a question of how it preserves its long-term relationship with the country, with whoever is going to come to be running the government now.

[00:48:50]

It seems to me that the only – U.S. has to come off the fence. It has been sitting on the fence. If you – if you have been listening to Hillary Clinton yesterday: Yes, we support the protestors but we also support the government. Well, you cannot do both when they are at loggerheads with each other. (Laughter.) I mean, you have to make a choice.

And I think the only position the U.S. can take is to call for a government of national unity. I think that's the way, essentially, to sit on the fence in a constructive way because, in the end, we know that there has to be a process of negotiations. They have to come together. There has to be some compromise. And we should be very clear about this.

[00:49:29]

I refer you to the article in – on The New York Times this morning – no, The Washington Post, sorry. Karen DeYoung's article that talks about explaining – well, the spokesperson for the State Department explaining the subtle change in the – in the wording of the declaration. And they use the word "transition." I'm sure that – with all due respect to diplomats in the room, or former diplomats in the room, I'm sure that they understand – maybe they understand the difference. I'm sure those crowds in Tahrir Square don't have an inkling about what that change of wording means.

So I think there has to be a clear position in terms of a government of national unity. The point that you raised, I think it's very interesting because I think there is no doubt that in the end the military is the one – it's going to play a pivotal role.

Somebody has to reestablish some sort of order in the country. I mean, economically the country is going to fall apart if this does not happen. People are terrified in the neighborhoods about what's happening and so on.

There is only one – the question is, which part of the military is going to take over? Who in the military is going to take over? Because so far, the military has been backing Mubarak. And the question – and I don't think they can reestablish control unless they stop backing Mubarak. In other words, if they ditch him; if they make it clear that it's time for him to leave. Because otherwise, the crowds will not stop demonstrating. And then the only way the army can impose order is a Tiananmen Square. And, you know, God forbid that that should happen.

[00:51:09]

But essentially, the only way that you can reestablish order in that country is after Mubarak has stepped down in some sort of government of – some sort of committee, some sort of government of national unity, whatever has been put together.

MR. MUASHER: Okay, let's get some people from the back, please.

MS. OTTAWAY: You have a woman right here! (Laughter.) You are looking for one – (laughter).

MR. MUASHER: I'm looking for a woman! (Chuckles.)

[00:51:39]

Q: Jessica Mathews, Carnegie Endowment. I wonder where this goes from here. In particular, the countries that we keep hearing about – other dominoes – are Sunni countries. And so I wonder, is there's something – is this a Sunni wave?

And then the other point is, I wonder what it feels like in Iran to be – to have been somebody who was in the streets a year ago and whether you think that this – effects of this may touch Iran as well.

MR. MUASHER: (Inaudible, off mc.) We'll have an all-women – questions. (Laughter.)

[00:52:22]

Q: Hi. Danya Greenfield with the Center for International Private Enterprise. There seems to be consensus that U.S. policy has been lackluster, to say the least. But I'm curious about U.S. efforts to support democracy assistance on a civil-society-to-civil-society basis; whether or not the efforts supported by USAID and

MEPI have been effective at all, have helped contribute to this, or have been on the sidelines and have not really played a role here. Groups like NDI and CIPE and NDI – and IRI and Internews and IFES – all of these efforts that have been going on for decades. What has been the effect of that?

MR. MUASHER: Okay. Thank you.

Q: Thank you. Kate Seelye, Middle East Institute. Two quick questions – one for Marwan specifically regarding Jordan and the impact of the change on Jordan. Do you think – we've seen many protests. Do you expect King Abdullah to respond to the demands on the part of the people to change Rifai, the prime minister, and to consider an elected prime minister? So what impact will this have on Jordan, which is also facing similar protests?

And Marina, a lot of talk on Gulf/2000 about the parallels between Egypt today and Iran in 1979, where, of course, you had a coalition of parties demand change and reform only to have the leftists and the socialists quashed by the Islamists. There is a lot of fear here in the States that the Muslim Brotherhood will emerge as the dominant voice in Egypt. Is that possible, or is this just, you know, fear-mongering here?

[00:54:08]

MR. MUASHER: Okay, quickly. To Jessica's question – I don't think it is a Sunni wave. I mean, it is – it is striking that, you know, in countries like Iran and Syria we haven't seen anything yet. And once again, you know, countries are different, which means, you know, not everybody's going to react in the same way. But I don't think it's because of a Sunni wave. I mean, Bashar said yesterday – had a very interesting statement in which he said Syria will go for political reform, which means that, you know, he's not unaware – (laughter) – of what is going on in the rest of the region.

In Iran it already happened last year. I mean, it's unfortunate that the regime cracked with big force. But it's already happening in Iran. In fact, they have, in a way, sort of gone ahead of the Sunnis in protesting what is going on.

[00:55:23]

I hope I'm – I will not sound harsh with regard to democracy assistance. But I have to be honest: Having been on the other side in government, these programs do very little. Very little. They give the façade of democracy being supported while, in fact they are, in my view so far, no longer – no more than ad hoc programs that don't add up to, you know, a solid process that leads in the end to not just liberalization but to power-sharing, to a system of checks and balances.

So far, they have not done that. I think both the U.S. and Arab governments have played the game – the U.S. saying, you know, this is to help democracy, and Arab states saying, yes, we have programs to help democracy. If you look at almost every single one of them, I do not think that they have done – they have done so.

[00:56:30]

In my view, the issue is not about money as much as about a political will to do things differently. This is not about, you know, a training program here or an awareness program there. This is about a process by which the political establishments in the Arab world commit to opening up the system in a serious manner that would result in power sharing. That means strong parliaments; that means, you know, an independent judiciary; that means true freedom of the press.

You do it in a gradual manner, certainly. No one is looking for, you know, revolutions that have not worked anyway in the Arab world. So you need to do it in a gradual manner. But gradual must mean serious. And gradual doesn't mean a snail, you know, type pace as has been the case before. And I would – I would certainly revisit all these programs and focus more on the political discussions that are going on between the U.S. and countries of the region rather than give the illusion that by giving such money, the U.S. is helping the cause of democracy in the region.

[57:55]

And to the last question on Jordan, once again, this is not about a change of government only. I mean, the king might very well change the government. I'm not going to predict whether that will happen or not. But it doesn't – it's not about a change of government. It's about a change of course.

And that means that it must also involve what we have talked about in other countries of the region: A national unity government, in my view, that would include all the political forces including the Muslim Brotherhood; a commitment to change the election law so that you do, you know, come up with a strong parliament that will end up – as the constitution states – that will, you know, end up really sharing power in the country; a government of reformers, because in the Arab world, what has been tried is either reform without reformers, or, in few cases, reformers without reform. Well, both don't work.

If reform is to work, you need to bring reformers and a program, and do it in a sustained manner over a long period of time. This is what needs to be done, I don't think just in Jordan, but across the Arab world as well. And I hope that Arab leaders are drawing the right lessons from what has happened in Egypt and Tunisia.

[59:20]

MS. OTTAWAY: Okay. Very quickly on the – well, most Arab countries are Sunni countries, so that, essentially, it's bound – just on the law of statistics, there are bound to be more Sunni regimes affected than other regimes.

I totally agree with Marwan on the issue of U.S. democracy assistance in these kinds of countries. Let me point out that Egypt was – Egypt was particularly closed to organizations like NDI and IRI and IFES. They just have not had even a chance to be players there. But it's a form of organization, as small NGOs, that is really much more suitable to put the pressure on the government in a democratic system than to bring change in an undemocratic system. So I think in this situation, that assistance is not really useful.

[01:00:14]

Concerning the possibility of the quote-unquote "hijacking" of the movement by the Muslim Brotherhood – which is, frankly, they have as much a right to be there as anyone else. But the question is, what is the strength of the Muslim Brotherhood at this point? And I think – I – we know that they are better organized than the secular parties at this point; that the secular opposition parties essentially are disastrous; the Wafd party, the (Gamaat) – you know, they're practically nonexistent in terms of organization.

The Muslim Brotherhood has shown a capacity when it has participated in election to do something. They have an organization, and so on. Do they have the support of the majority of the population? It's very doubtful.

There is a lot of opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood. And it seems to me that the way to decrease the chances of the Muslim Brotherhood coming out in a very strong position is to open up the formation of political parties.

I mean, one of the real mistakes that the Mubarak regime has done is to crack down on all opposition, even the least dangerous of all opposition. I mean, I can't imagine anybody being afraid of the Wafd party, with all due respect. I mean, it's not a dangerous organization. But they kept even these parties from organizing. And the way in which you make it less likely that anybody will come to dominate the outcome is to – really, to open it up and have as many voices as possible and not to try and repress everybody, which is what the government has been doing.

[01:01:48]

MR. MUASHER: Sayid (ph), we have to give a chance to everybody else. I'm sorry, but go ahead. It's – a lot of questions. Okay, and then you, sir. Resume.

Q: Yes, I would like you to continue a little on your basic suggestion of looking beyond Egypt. And when I consider the prospects for U.S. policy urging a brisker pace in real reform, it seems to me it could be feasible, with the exception of the Saudis. I wonder what Saudi-American relations, in your view, would look like in – let us say that 12 months from now Egypt is under a new government, and from the U.S. point of view things have not turned out so badly, and the U.S. is pressing the Saudis to change. How would you envision this?

[01:02:55]

MR. MUASHER: Yes, sir.

Q: Judd Harriet (sp), documentary filmmaker. I'd like to hear your views on the future of the three most important initiatives in U.S. foreign policy: the war on terror, the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, and the Palestinian-Israeli question – the negotiations to a Palestinian settlement. Would these three initiatives – or do they resonate with those forces that are now on the street? Is there any future to them, in your view?

MR. MUASHER: Okay. One more question. Yes, please.

Q: Whatever happened to the – whatever happened to the Gamaat Islamiya? I mean, these were very, very hardcore extremists. They tried to assassinate Mubarak. They were – they massacred tourists. Are they completely gone? And is there a danger that they'll crop up in the midst of this chaos?

MR. MUASHER: Shall we start with you?

[01:04:04]

MS. OTTAWAY: Okay. I'll do that. Well, you know, it – 12 months from now, it's a – it's a century, right? But let me just – (laughs) – let me just address these.

The Saudis have been extremely resilient in adapting themselves to new situations. I mean, we have this view of the Saudis – that they are essentially very conservative, very staid in what they are doing. But they have also taken very interesting positions, they have been a leading force in encouraging the rapprochement of Lebanon with the – with Syria to try to make peace. And it tried to establish a modus vivendi between Hariri and Hezbollah and so on and so forth.

[01:04:50]

So I think what we have seen is a Saudi Arabia that for all its, you know, conservativism, essentially, also has some capacity to adapt to the situation. The big question is that we don't know what the leadership is, because King Abdullah has been perhaps more open to reform than a lot of other people. How much longer is King Abdullah going to be there? I mean, and who's going to be the next one?

I think we are coming to a point in Saudi Arabia where all the "Kremlinology" about who is coming next is – has to defer to who dies first, almost, at this point. So they clearly don't know where it's going. But it seems to me that we should not underestimate the capacity of Saudi Arabia to adapt itself to the situation.

[01:05:42]

Concerning Gamaat Islamiya, I think they have – I think they – I don't think they are major players in this. I don't think you can ever say, you know, they are gone forever, there are not going to be any more acts of terrorism and there is not going to be any terrorist movement.

But I think there has been a combination of a rethinking of the position on the part of the leadership and a lot of repression on the part of the government, so that we have not – we have not seen them as being particularly active now. I think the real actors – I mean, the Muslim Brothers are a much more important actor, I think, than Gamaat Islamiya is.

Very briefly, on the issue of the impact on the initiatives – on the war on terror, on the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and the peace process – there is no doubt that if Egypt becomes more democratic, the population of Egypt is not terribly friendly to Israel. Okay? That isn't – there has never been an uprising or an upsurge of support for the peace treaty. That is, there are very strong Palestinian sentiments, and so on.

[01:07:04]

That said, somehow I doubt, barring the worst-case scenario that your – sometimes the State Department seems to have in mind – that is, that of a takeover by radical Islamists, I doubt very much that the foreign policy of Egypt is going to change in the near future. I doubt very much that any government coming to power at this time with the kind of domestic issues that they are facing is going to choose to go back on the peace treaty with Israel as the first thing – the first thing they do. Very frankly, I don't think that that would make much difference.

You may see differences in terms of the reopening of the – you know, the border with Gaza, for example, and so on. But I don't think we are going to see a big overall change of direction. It seems to me very unlikely.

MR. MUASHER: Let me respond, and then I have to leave at 9:45, unfortunately, for another appointment. But I think Marina can stay until 10. Right, Marina?

MS. OTTAWAY: If there are questions, I'll stay until 10.

[01:08:07]

MR. MUASHER: On Saudi Arabia, look – I don't mean – and I hope my comments did not imply that the U.S. should be the principal driver for this reform process. I mean, there are things that the U.S. can do. There are things that the U.S. cannot do. And the U.S. can work with countries in varying degrees. Okay? And maybe, you

know, the U.S. ability to work with the Saudis on reform might be – might be, you know, smaller than its ability with other Arab countries.

The thing to note, in my view, is the lessons to be drawn should primarily be drawn by the Arab countries themselves, rather than by the U.S., because, as we have seen in Egypt, whatever the U.S. view on Egypt was, in the end, did not matter, you know, once people went out in the street.

[01:09:02]

The argument in the Arab world, in my view, should be either this is a reform process led by Arab governments in an orderly way, or they can watch it be led for them in the street. But the status quo of expecting things to be static and for power to be absolute forever is clearly not sustainable anymore. That is the lesson to be drawn. And it must be drawn principally Arab countries themselves. Then the U.S. can come in and help.

The U.S. can help, at least by, like I said, supporting a reform process, but supporting a credible reform process, rather than what, in my view, was a façade of everybody playing a game: Arab countries playing the game that they are reforming, and the U.S. playing the game that they are supporting this reform process. That has not worked. And from now on, I hope everybody will learn the lesson that this needs to be, as I said, a credible, sustained, gradual and serious reform process moving ahead.

[01:10:12]

With regard to the Egypt and the peace treaty, I agree with Marina. Any government emerging in Egypt probably will be less warm, if you want, in its relationship with Israel, but to take it to the point of abrogating the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty I don't think is an option that anybody is looking at in Egypt. I do not expect that will happen at all. Egypt might not, let's say, be as forthcoming in supporting the peace initiatives that are going on right now. But frankly, is there a peace process going on right now, or are we simply going through the motions?

And if we are going through the motions, as I think we are, it doesn't matter whether Egypt is going to support it or not. You know, it – there is no serious peace process going on to start with that we should be afraid of abandoning if a new government comes to Egypt.

The last point I want to make – and I made it in The Washington Post today, and I'll make it again: This is – this is not about Israel, okay? And I think Arab publics justifiably, in my view, get mad, every time something happens there, that the U.S. seems to look at this from the prism of its relationships with Israel.

[01:11:51]

This is about corruption. This is about governments. And for once, Arab publics would like the U.S. to look at it from that angle rather than from the angle of U.S.-Israel relationships every single time. It is a very important relationship, I agree. But I mean, for once, Arab publics would like the U.S. to just, you know –look at it as it is: a movement about governance and about corruption.

Thank you very much. I truly have to go.

Q: We've heard about young people trying to reclaim their dignity. Is this all about reclaiming Arab dignity?

MR. MUASHER: Not all about. But let's remember the Arab world is a young – is young in age. I mean, 70 percent of the Arab world is under 30 years of age. So obviously, you know, the young are playing a very important role in this. But I wouldn't say it's just the young. I think everybody is sort of fed up with the low quality of governance.

[01:13:04]

The fact is, most of these people are young because of the makeup of the population, not just in Egypt but across the Arab world.

MS. OTTAWAY: Okay. Thank you, Marwan. (Applause.)

This is beginning to look like the farewell symphony. So that if you are interested, I can stay for a little longer. Before we – before I forget, though, I want to announce that on Thursday morning we are going to have – most of you should have received an invitation to a meeting that was originally supposed to discuss the changes in the character of the Egyptian press.

We had two visitors from Egypt that were supposed to come. We do not know if they are coming. Whether or not they come, the meeting is going to be held. And it's going to be an update on the situation on Egypt. We have – lunchtime, yes. Thank you very much. 12:15, right? (Chuckles.) The meeting is at 12:15.

So there will be a meeting, essentially, to further discuss the situation in Egypt. We'll send out a reminder today. And it's going to be much broader than what was originally announced, and we are going to be very flexible in terms of what we'll focus on, because it really depends on events and depends on whether the visitors come.

[01:14:31]

Okay. I'll reopen the floor. And there is a question here – we'll wait for you. In back, there. Yeah, the gentleman here.

Q: Thank you. Is it on? Yes, good. My name is Yayef Anussi (ph). I'm with United States for U.S. – United States Africa 2017 (ph) project. And I am the lead person for the special operations divisions. I was here December 15.

[01:15:01]

Marina did a great job, and the other people in the panel. And I made a statement. I said, in view of all that you've said, do you see a popular uprising happening? Because from our view, what's going to happen in Africa and North Africa very soon is an uprising against the political class. That was my statement. The only solution they have in Egypt is for a transition government to come in and show that there are free and fair elections, which I said last time. That's what will have to happen: free and fair elections.

MS. OTTAWAY: Yes.

[01:15:45]

Q: Thank you, Dr. Ottaway. My name is Ed Gaier. I'm from George Mason University. I wanted to know what your thoughts on – are on the sort of decentralized structure of the opposition right now and how

they're mobilized, whereas in the past, more hierarchical, organized opposition has been either co-opted or targeted by the regime.

Can a decentralized structure now have advantages in that the regime would have to respond by sort of expanding civil rights and civil liberties and becoming more inclusive on a citizenship basis, as opposed to organizational? Thanks.

MS. OTTAWAY: Okay. Let me – the first one was a statement I don't think I have to address.

Concerning the – this decentralized structure, I think we are – as I said earlier – we are seeing both the strength of those decentralized structures and the weaknesses.

And the strength is that they're very difficult to repress. You know, if you have an organization, a network without a head, it's very difficult for the government to destroy it. And they are very good at bringing people out. Let me point out that we are exaggerating the impact of social media. Revolutions have taken place historically without the help of social media. But certainly they played an important role there.

[01:17:05]

The problem is that these networks are not in a position to negotiate now. They are not in a position to engage in a sustained dialogue with the government, because you need people, you need leaders in order to do that. So those are both the strengths and the weaknesses there. That's all.

Okay, I think we are coming to the end?

There are two publications. They're from the last couple days. They are out on the table. One is this paper that Amr Hamzawy and I wrote on the protest movements and political change in the Arab world, which is based on a year of research, essentially, that was still unfinished. But we decided we'd better publish what we had before it – because I think it's relevant to what is going on.

And the second one is the paper by Marwan Muasher called "The Arab World in Crisis: Redefining Arab Moderation." And both of them are out there on the table. And thank you very much for coming. (Applause.)

(END)